The blows came fast - BAP. bap bap. BAP. bap bap. BAP. - creating a rhythm that was hypnotic. She used the right hand to jab, the left to throw straights. bap bap (jab). BAP (straight). Occasionally a hook over two jabs. bap bapBAP.

Rita Khaner watched through the gym's window. The sound and motion; the swinging heavy bag. The violence. It mesmerized.

Suddenly the rhythm went haywire: BAP. BAP.
BAPBAPBAPBAPBAPBAPBAPBAPBAP

Rita reflexively stepped away from the window. Nicki Smits was going crazy on the bag now, furiously wailing away. No more structured combinations or shuffled steps, just hammer-blows from each hand, no coordination, standing there on flat feet, legs splayed, trying to cause an inanimate object to feel pain.

Nicki held her gloved left hand against the bag to keep it from swaying and used her right to deliver jackhammer punches where a person's head might be. Five. Ten. Fifteen. Not stopping

Rita squared her shoulders and entered the gym.

"Enough," Rita said.

Nicki dropped her hands. A small woman, she stood five three and went one ten dripping wet, which she was, sweat pouring from her beautiful face. Her eyes and hair were black, she had smooth and flawless skin, and her figure wrapped in a skintight Lycra bodysuit was perfectly proportioned.

She stood before Rita, heaving from exertion, with her mouth set in a hard line, lips bloodless and tight.

"Does that make you feel better?" Rita asked. Nicki tilted her chin. She expelled air and let her shoulders slump.

"Because it will take a toll. Toughen your skin. Give you lines." Rita shrugged. "Might be worth it, though. If it helps."

She handed Nicki a towel.

"He'll be here in thirty minutes."

Nicki nodded and went to the shower room.

Rita watched her as she walked away, still feeling a little uneasy about that girl.

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Nicki was beautiful, true, but Rita was transcendent. Glorious. Stunning. She was every poet’s word, every painter’s sight. Tall, with an hourglass figure, she too had black hair, ah but her eyes were emerald, and they could see everything. The slightest tilt of her cupid-bow lips and you'd know immediately what she thought, and you'd desperately want her approval.

Unfortunately, because there are very few poets and painters left in the world; and none of them rich, Rita soon learned that she was also every perverts' wolf-whistle; every pornographers' flash-pot.

And there are plenty of them around. An overabundance. Many quite rich.

But the years were piling up behind Nicki and she had already worked her way through the wealthiest of those degenerates; stealing little and stealing big as she came and went. Now she had enough money to back a play for the lifetime score. The one that would put her out-of-reach of those pudgy, silver-haired hard-ons forever.

Also, if worked correctly, this job would mean the end of a particularly sadistic pimp who really did deserve to die.

A fortune made, and justice served in one nasty piece of confidence and double cross. Nicki had earned the right to run this game; more, she needed it to be a success.

If not for her bank account, then for her soul.

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Nicki entered the office, dressed and coiffed to present the perfect fem-shark - royal blue pants suit with flats. One flash of color, a ruby pin, on the lapel. All business.

"Well," Rita said, "The warrior princess cleans up nicely."

The corner of Nicki's mouth flickered up briefly for a response. She crossed the floor to the kitchenette and got a bottle of water from the refrigerator.

"I never understood women's self-defense classes," Rita continued, tidying up papers on her sleek glass and metal-pipe desk. "No matter how strong or skilled a woman becomes, there will always be at least one man out there who can beat her ass. Sorry, but it's true."

"Well." Nicki wiped water from her lips with the back of her hand. "As long as I avoid that one man, I guess I can handle the rest."

Rita smiled. "Darlin', you can't avoid that man. He'll find you."

Nicki sat on one of the padded chairs and crossed her legs. She looked at the digital wall clock. "He's late," she said.

Rita stood up and went to the kitchenette for a drink - tomato juice. She could have asked Nicki to bring her a can, but that's not how Rita saw her assistant.

"What's the worst humiliation a woman can suffer?" Rita asked in a tone that made the question almost seem rhetorical. Indeed, Rita knew enough about Nicki's background in the sex-for-sale gutter to realize that the question may not deserve an answer for its implied cruelty.

Nicki, however, flung an arm over the back of her chair to look Rita in the eye. "Not having money," she replied.

And that's why Rita had taken the young girl on as an apprentice. She had sharp edges.

"Almost," Rita said, returning to her desk. "But an even worse humiliation is when all the money in the world won't make a difference. Then she's really and truly fucked."

Nicki's eyes narrowed, searching for the meaning.

The phone buzzed. Rita hit a button and said, "Show him in."